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Importance of Exploratory Writing in Critical Thinking and Learning

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According to Murray (1972), writing is “the process of discovery through language,” and “the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world to communicate what we learn about our world” (p. 4). In the learning process, writing is considered to increase critical thinking, since it provides an outlet to contemplate the topic (Murray 1972). Consequently, teaching writing is not about teaching how to write a final writing piece, but teaching how to think through writing (Murray, 1972). Especially, exploratory writing provides an important piece to educate students that writing is a process requiring preparation (Bean, 2011; Lindermann, 2001; Murray 1972). Students will also “probe a subject matter thoroughly and systematically” through exploratory writing because this allows them to navigate through linguistic, cultural, and perceptual stereotypes that limit our thinking process, and, as a result, increase their critical thinking skills and complete a final writing project (Lindemann, 2001, p. 93).

In recognition of the importance of exploratory writing to improve critical thinking for students, a presentation project that incorporated exploratory writing for two weeks in a course about social, psychological, and cultural aspects of dress in Fall 2014 was developed at a Southern university in the United States. The purpose of this study was (1) to share the curriculum development and content behind the project, and (2) to analyze student reflective essay about exploratory writings after the final presentation to identify students’ learning processes and outcomes in terms of improving critical thinking. Utilizing comparative thematic analysis (Glaser, 1965) of students’ reflective essays regarding exploratory writings for their final presentation, this research analyzed student learning outcomes.

During Fall 2014, students studying social, psychological, and cultural aspects of dress were assigned to complete an 8-minute team presentation about Japanese culture and dress. As part of their presentation preparation, students were asked to complete two types of exploratory writing assignments by writing weekly over the course of two weeks—Reading Reflection and Wiki Picture assignments. First, after a lecture, students were asked to read textbook chapters about the meanings of dress and the body and articles related to Japanese culture and dress. Second, students articulated (1) how a concept from a related textbook chapter is connected to their assigned reading and (2) why students think so in a Reading Reflection. They were also asked to find a picture relevant to any course concept for that week and explain how it is related to the course concept for Wiki Picture. For Wiki Picture, students were able to choose any image from the web as long as they properly cited each picture. Students shared Reading Reflection and Wiki Picture with classmates in Blackboard wiki pages as a part of the process. After completion of Reading Reflection and Wiki Picture, students were grouped in teams of three and completed a final presentation to present their findings about Japanese culture and dress in traditional and

modern Japanese society. They completed a reflective essay about experiences related to the exploratory writing assignments and its relationship to the final presentation after that.

To explore the process of students' learning and outcomes throughout the curriculum, reflective essays from 21 students, turned in electronically at the end of the semester, were used for data analysis using a comparative thematic analysis (Glaser, 1965). Research found the exploratory writing process helped students by increasing affective and cognitive dimensions of learning. Students were able to gain understanding and appreciation to a subject matter, Japanese culture and dress. Ester said: *By having to find pictures that depicted Japanese culture and read articles about the culture, I gained a better understanding and appreciativeness for it.* Students also became more interested and appreciative of the course concepts. They were able to understand course concepts better and recall them easily because of required readings and visual images. Specifically, Reading Reflection, an exploratory writing assignment based on a textbook and assigned readings, provided a sequential process for students to learn course concepts. Students acquired facts, compared these facts to what they already knew, and gained broader perspectives about the course concepts. Furthermore, students were able to associate course concepts to mind by contemplation and verification. For example, one of the students said: *The writings enabled me to contemplate what I had read...I either grasped a concept or I did not, and the writings revealed this to me [Fancine].* As a result of improved learning experiences, students were able to learn critical thinking skills by posing their own perspectives/opinions on their readings. In addition, students were able to prepare for a final presentation at the end of the semester, which lead students to the preparation process for the final project smoothly. Students were also able to understand what they are presenting and made them less nervous to present to other students.

This study investigated how exploratory writing assignments in social, psychological, and cultural aspects of dress affect student learning by (1) exploring how students learn through exploratory writing and improve their critical thinking, and (2) identifying the effects of exploratory writing to prepare students' for their final presentations. This research provided empirical evidence of the effect of exploratory writing to increase student learning and critical thinking, based on a systematic approach for the first time in the field of textiles and apparel. It also supported exploratory writings to help students complete their final project more easily by preparing them throughout the semester. Future research could investigate the effects of revision to increase student learning and critical thinking, since revision is also considered one of the most important factors that comprise writing. Finally, this study can provide a protocol for how to develop curriculum that incorporates exploratory writing assignments to increase student learning.

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